

Ajaccio

Corsica is a mix of stylish towns, dense forests and high peaks. **Luigi Vallero** visited Ajaccio, the largest of four airports on the island, situated in the Campo dell'Oro to the east of the city.

Set in a picturesque location on the northern shores of a gulf bearing its name, the city of Ajaccio lays at the foot of densely wooded hills that flank its northern and western boundaries.

A harbour visited by cruise ships and ferries from mainland France lies close to the original citadel, and the city's maze of tiny streets, gardens and museums are strung out for some miles along the valley of the Gravona River.

The small, bustling commune is home to the prefecture of Corse-du-Sud and is the administrative centre of the Collectivité Territoriale de Corse as well as being the largest population centre on the island, with

65,000 inhabitants. The famous French military and political leader Napoléon Bonaparte was born in Ajaccio in 1769 – his birthplace, Maison Bonaparte, is now a public museum.

With ferries taking some six hours or more to reach the island from the mainland, air travel is an important means of reaching Corsica. Named after the island's famous child, Aéroport d'Ajaccio Napoléon Bonaparte (AJA) lies around 3 miles (5km) to the east of the city's harbour.

Having handled 1,366,020 passengers last year, it was the busiest of the Corsican airports and ranked 13th of all

French airports. The facility currently accommodates around 40% of the air traffic to and from the island, well ahead of the other airports at Bastia, Figari and Calvi.

Small beginnings

Commercial aviation came to Ajaccio in 1935, when regular seaplane services began connecting the city's harbour with Marseilles. The first runway dates further back to when a grass strip was marked out on one of the few flat areas close to the city – on the alluvial plain close to the mouth of the Gravona and Prunelli rivers, not far from where the current airport is situated. The Aéroclub de la Corse set up on the site at the Campo dell'Oro (the field of gold, which is thought to refer to the area originally being regarded as a rich, cultivated ground) in 1935.

Early in World War Two, a unit of the Vichy French Air Force moved into the Campo dell'Oro airfield, and an additional east-west grass runway was laid. Later in the conflict Armée de l'Air (French Air Force) Fighter Group GC2/7, a French unit of the Royal Air Force, started flying Supermarine Spitfires from the airfield.

The weak, unpaved surface and the surrounding hills imposed restrictions on flying that meant the field could not be used by larger aircraft, and accidents became a common occurrence.

In 1944, the US Army Air Force took over and upgraded the runway by laying metal grids on the surface. A North American

► Traffic is a mix of full service and low-cost airlines, including easyJet flights to Basel, Geneva, London Gatwick and Paris.

► Bag drop desks and a café are situated in a bright roomy hall on the ground floor of the main terminal building.

▼ Air Corsica maintains Public Service Obligation routes to Marseilles and Nice using ATR 72s including F-GRPK (c/n 727). (All photos author except where stated)



P-51 Mustang squadron moved in to defend the Consolidated B-24 Liberator bombers based at other airfields in eastern Corsica.

In the ensuing months improvements continued with the paving of the original airstrip, the construction of a new main north-south runway and a temporary passenger terminal.

In 1957 the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie d'Ajaccio et Sartène (the local chamber of commerce) took over the management of the airport. It proposed the construction of a new terminal and control tower complex, work on which commenced in 1958.

The new facilities opened in 1961. Initially served solely by Air France Douglas DC-3s and DC-4s, the French carrier brought the jet era to Corsica in the 1960s when it introduced Sud Aviation SE-210 Caravelles on routes from Marseilles, Nice and Paris.

A tragedy occurred on September 11, 1968 when Air France flight AF1611, operated by Caravelle F-BOHB, departed from Ajaccio and crashed on approach to Nice Côte d'Azur Airport, taking 95 lives.

Tourism and growth

European package tours really took off in the 1970s and the island's idyllic location in the Mediterranean made it popular with those who chased summer sun.

The very busy peak holiday season saw increasing numbers of regular charter services to major European airports flown by French carriers Air Liberté, Corse Air, Minerve, Euralair, Europe Aero Service and Touraine Air Transport – plus Dan Air and Britannia Airways from the UK.

Scheduled traffic at AJA also gradually increased through the following decades. By the beginning of the 1990s Air France,

Passengers disembark from A320-214 F-HZPG (c/n 5906) on April 10. Air Corsica's busier routes to Paris are flown with Airbus A320s.



Air Inter and the then recently founded, locally based CCM Airlines (Compagnie Aérienne Corse Méditerranée) connected the island to Lyons and Toulon in addition to the traditional mainline services to Paris, Marseilles and Nice. Another local commuter airline, Kyrnair, even tried scheduled flights between the Corsican airports, but the services didn't last long.

In 1990 the airport handled 817,256 passengers –arriving on aircraft ranging from the Kyrnair Embraer EMB-110 Bandeirante to widebodied Air France Airbus A300s deployed on the summer season Paris services.

Almost anything in the inventories of French airlines could make an appearance at AJA during that era, including Fokker F-28s, Caravelles, Dassault Mercuries, Boeing 727s and 737s and the first of the now pervasive Airbus A320s and ATRs.



Constantly increasing demand for flights to Corsica in the mid-1990s saw Air France introduce 747-200s on its peak weekend flights from Paris Orly, and when they were retired the airline's 747-400s also put in appearances.

The use of such large aircraft still requires special authorisation, however, due to the challenging nature of the short 7,897ft (2,407m) runway, the mountainous terrain in the surrounding area and the limited parking space on the apron.

In 2000, 1,072,532 passengers used AJA's facilities. The reducing number of 747s in Air France's fleet prompted the airport to evaluate its ability to handle the 777-300ER, which the airline was planning to base at Orly airport. The work included investigating runway reinforcement and reviewing the parking area geometry



▲ Air France Airbus A321-111 F-GMZA (c/n 498) departs for Paris Charles de Gaulle, against the stunning backdrop of mountainous terrain.

▲▲ Air France and Air Corsica jointly fly the Public Service Obligation route from Ajaccio to Paris. Airbus A321-111 F-GMZA awaits passengers prior to departing on one of these services.

◀ The current terminal building is modern, spacious and functional.

Spotting at Ajaccio

There are several locations around the airport where movements can be watched and photographed. On the opposite side of runway from the terminal, near the end of the now disused east-west runway, a narrow lane is close to the midpoint of 02/20. The west-facing area offers views of traffic on the runway or parked at the terminal. At the north end of the airfield are several locations around the end of Runway 20 that

afford views aircraft on final approach, while vacant land near a traffic island on the N193 and N195 roads offers slightly more distant views of the touchdown point. At the 02 threshold, aircraft landing or taxiing for departure can be watched from land adjacent to the beach, although fences limit the opportunities for photography at ground level. Most airline traffic is concentrated in the early and mid-morning, mid-afternoon and evening.

necessary to accommodate the new type. With runway and apron improvement works complete, throughput at AJA grew steadily to reach 1,218,705 passengers in 2012, a 3.6% increase over the previous period. The increase was largely attributable to the arrival of low-cost carriers (LCCs) which opened new routes to cities such as Nantes and Bordeaux, generating 42,831 passengers during the year.

Ajaccio today

The current terminal covers 183,000sq ft (17,000m²) and has a capacity of 1.5mppa. Its efficient architecture comprises a linear building with vaulted structures at each end hosting the arrival and departure facilities.

These areas include gardens, palm trees and other Mediterranean flora which bring a bright, holiday feel to the airport. The departure area houses 19 check-in desks and a number of self-service kiosks. Airside, there are five boarding gates and concessions including bars, a shop selling local delicacies and a bookstall. The arrival hall has three baggage carousels and another snack shop and bar. Like most Corsican airports, Ajaccio offers crews and passengers a challenging and scenic flight, especially when approaching from the northwest to use Runway 20. Descent takes place through a narrowing valley that gently directs aircraft to the runway threshold via a gently curving



final approach path. Once on the ground, the runway ends at the beach, much like St Maarten in the Caribbean.

Last year was AJA's best ever for passenger throughput, a small increase of 1.2% pushing it past the previous peak in 2013. As elsewhere in Europe, much of the growth has come from LCCs, with traffic from this sector increasing by 193% in five years from 116,531 passengers in 2010 to 341,995 in 2014. Although these carriers have affected traditional airlines, most of their traffic has transferred from the sea ferries.

Flights from Corsica to Marseilles, Nice and Paris Orly are regulated by the Continuité Territoriale, a public service obligation (PSO) guarantee regulated by the local government. The agreement specifies the frequencies, schedules, capacity offered and fares available to Corsican citizens, and the PSO services are currently flown by Air Corsica in co-operation with Air France.

Ajaccio is the main base for Air Corsica (the renamed CCM Airlines), the island's flag carrier. It flies the PSO routes, code-shared with Air France, to Orly and Marseilles with A320s, and to Marseilles and Nice using ATR 72s.

In addition to its PSO routes, Air Corsica flies the Corsican flag year-round to destinations that include Lyon and Toulouse, alongside seasonal services to Clermont-Ferrand, Liège, Nantes, Rome Fiumicino and Toulon. The demand for flights to Corsica is such that the

✈ Airport Statistics

ICAO:	LFKJ
IATA:	AJA
Location:	41° 55.27'N, 8° 48.09'E
Elevation:	17 ft (5m)
Runway:	02/20 7,897 x 120ft (2,407 x 45m)
Frequencies:	Approach: 127.775 Tower: 118.075 ATIS: 126.925
Website:	http://www.2a.cci.fr

airline wet leases larger aircraft, including Boeing 747-400s, during the peak holiday season.

Air France operates alongside Air Corsica on the PSO route to Paris, sharing costs and revenue. The French national carrier normally uses A320s or A321s on these routes, while regional services to Agen, Bordeaux, Brive-la-Gaillarde, Castres-Mazamet, La Rochelle, Lille, Metz-Nancy-Lorraine, Pau, Poitiers, Rennes and Strasbourg airports are flown by its regional partner Hop!, using a mix of ATR 72s, Bombardier Regional Jets and Embraer E-Jets.

The other airline competing on the trunk routes is XL Airways France, which deploys A320s on seasonal services to Lille and Paris Charles de Gaulle, although at peak times it puts additional capacity into the



Air Corsica Airbus A320-214 F-HZFM (c/n 5887) sits in the sun waiting to make another flight to Paris.



market using A330s.

Meanwhile, Air Méditerranée serves Paris Charles de Gaulle and Châlair Aviation has recently introduced ATR 42s on connections to Limoges and Perpignan.

Since moving into the airport in the summer of 2012, Spanish LCC Volotea has added seasonal services from Ajaccio

to Bordeaux, Brest, Caen, Lille, Montpellier, Nantes, Strasbourg and Toulouse using 125-seat Boeing 717s. easyJet, the airport's other major LCC, offers year-round services to Paris Charles de Gaulle and seasonal flights to EuroAirport Basel Mulhouse Freiburg and Geneva (operated by easyJet Switzerland), London Gatwick and Lyons.

▼ The airport sits alongside the blue waters of the Gulf of Ajaccio on the Campo dell'Oro (field of gold). (CCI d'Ajaccio/Corse du Sud)

Transavia has also recently introduced air links to Amsterdam, and Norwegian Air Shuttle connects Corsica to Scandinavia by flying to both Oslo Gardermoen and Stockholm Arlanda.

This summer, other European carriers offering services to Ajaccio included Thomas Cook Airlines Belgium and Brussels Airlines from Brussels; Jetairfly from Châteauroux and Châlons Vatry; Luxair from Luxembourg; Swiss from Geneva; and SmartWings serving Bratislava. Charter services are also provided by British Airways, Darwin Airlines and Travel Service.

Although airlines dominate at Ajaccio, there is room for the rest of aviation. Being a heavily forested area, the Sécurité Civile maintains a base at the airport from where its Canadair CL415 and specially modified Bombardier Dash 8-Q400 fire bombers operate when the risk of forest fires is high.

Light and corporate aircraft also have their own area at the airport, and even helicopters from yachts moored offshore occasionally drop in for fuel or to bring owners ashore.

Corsica, with its charming towns and villages, and large park and forest, will continue to woo tourists in the coming years, and LCCs will bring even more curious travellers to the island.

Napoléon Bonaparte Airport has spare capacity, and seems to have a bright future as a convenient stepping off point for these visitors as the traffic grows. ✕

Acknowledgements

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Work on a modern air traffic control tower started in 2006 and it opened two years later. The old structure was retained and is used as administrative offices.



Air Corsica Airbus A320s, including F-HZHM (c/n 5887), fly to Paris and Marseilles but are also used on peak-season services to other French cities.

